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SIPDIS

DEPART FOR EUR/CARC

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [RU](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: ARMENIANS IN SAMTSKHE-JAVAKHETI EXPRESS SOLIDARITY
WITH GEORGIA

REF: TBILISI 2007 3148

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Begin Summary and Comment: During the Ambassador's September 10-11 trip to the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, the president's representative to the region and local officials in Akhalkalaki expressed their solidarity with the federal government against Russian aggression. They said there were no problems in the region during the recent war with Russia. Even though Russian forces had probed as far as Borjomi, the people of the region--Georgian and Armenian alike--banded together to thwart their further advances. Akhalkalaki local officials highlighted the challenges of local government: no direct control over funding, lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities, allegedly corrupt officials appointed from Tbilisi, and laws which are difficult to implement at the local level. The main issue for the region, formerly the home of a large soviet-era military base, was the need for more jobs. Officials and NGO members expressed their gratitude for U.S. humanitarian assistance, moral support, and continuing diplomatic efforts. Solidarity with Georgians is significant as the residents in the region are more culturally influenced by Armenia and more politically influenced by Russia than by Georgia. Relations between the 95% Armenian population in the region and Georgian officials at times have been tense and underscores that, although Georgian citizens are not always on the same page, regardless of ethnicity, they are united against Russian aggression. End Summary.

UNITED WE STAND -- RUSSIANS NOT WELCOME HERE

¶2. (C) The Ambassador traveled to Borjomi, Akhaltsikhe, and Akhalkalaki (Samtskhe-Javakheti region) to meet with local officials and NGOS, open our ninth Georgian "American Corner" in Akhaltsikhe and see first-hand the damage to Borjomi Kharagauli National Park. The president's representative for the region, Giorgi Khachidze, escorted the group in Borjomi and Akhaltsikhe. In Akhalkalaki, the local mayor, Nairi Itsarian and the chair of the city council, Khachil Aivazian, escorted the group. The president's representative (often referred to as governor) is appointed by the President and oversees the administration of several subordinate mayors in his respective region. Mayors are also appointed. At the local level, the mayor works with a chair of the city council, who is elected. Thus, Khachidze is responsible for overseeing the Akhaltsikhe, Borjomi, and Akhalkalaki mayors.

¶3. (C) Khachidze recounted that three Russians in GRU uniforms had made it to Borjomi's outer limits, drunk and red-faced, and brashly attempted to push their way into the center. The governor and mayor, along with police from Samtskhe-Javakheti regional headquarters (ethnic Armenians), politely blocked the road and eventually sent the inebriated troika packing. Khachidze said he later saw the same three men whom he said were GRU officers on television in civilian clothes in Poti.

14. (C) In Akhalkalaki, Javakheti Civil Forum NGO leader Misha Kuliki, an ethnic Greek, told the Ambassador that annexation of Georgia by Russia is unacceptable and thanked the U.S. for its support during and after the conflict. Iritsian and Aivazian said the first days of the conflict everyone was uneasy, wondering if there would be civil unrest in the region. Iritsian was on the phone daily with Tbilisi officials gauging the situation, discussing whether forces should be mobilized. The region saw about 200 IDPs who came from other places, small in comparison to other regions, but the hostilities as a whole did not affect Akhalkalaki. Many of the city's municipal work projects, including road construction, repair of the city administration building and a summer camp, only saw a work stoppage of several days. Iritsian said that the banks closed only for two days and that pensioners had continued to receive their monthly stipends throughout the ordeal.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT -- GOOD IDEA, HARD TO DO

15. (C) Local NGOs told the Ambassador that they were pleased for the most part with their local government. The embassy delegation noticed several visible projects underway to improve infrastructure. Iritsian and Aivazian said that the main obstacle they face is implementing the laws for local government passed by Parliament. The laws are not practical, implementation is not clear, and they often need regional adaptation. Both said they were unclear of the role of the governor's representative in the region, and chafed at the superfluous layer of bureaucracy which added time, but yielded no results. Iritsian said if he is looking for

TBILISI 00001834 002 OF 002

additional funding, he must write a letter himself to the Minister of Finance, but this letter must be coordinated through the governor's representative. Additionally, all local governments were given the directive that they must buy 100 tons of grapes from the Kakheti region to fill the deficit of income as a result of the Russian embargo on Georgian wine and agricultural products. Iritsian said, in theory, he can do this, but how can his region, where they do not make wine, absorb these costs? In reality, the grapes are practically given away. Both local leaders were frustrated by what they called Tbilisi-appointed bureaucrats (the particular example they gave was those working in the local Civil Registry Office) who are corrupt, give them a bad name, but whom they do not have the authorization to fire.

RELATIONS BETWEEN TURKEY AND ARMENIA

16. (C) Iritsian and Aivazian welcomed the visit of Turkey's President Gul to Armenia and hoped that with the opening of roads, diplomatic relations and eventually compromise on the historical issues would follow. As Aivazian put it, "How long can you be hostile to each other?" Both said they realized that the situation cannot be resolved until there is dialogue and the Turkey of today is a democracy, and thus possible. They welcomed U.S. encouragement of dialogue and were practical about how fast events would occur. As Aivazian put it, "We don't expect that Turkey will recognize the Armenian genocide tomorrow, but it is good that Gul is breaking the ice. Perhaps the best is to start with confidence building events, ie., sporting events, and move on gradually from there. What Armenians want most is respect." Regarding Turkey, Aivazian said he has fewer problems crossing the border into Turkey than he does into Armenia. He said he was irritated by nit-picking Armenian custom control officials, who label as "contraband" anything over one sack of potatoes or one package of diapers. Aivazian said that he personally has spent hours at the border waiting to cross and knows others who have spent the entire day, only to be told that the customs officer's computer doesn't work. "If Europe is without borders, where is our regional cooperation?" he asked.

PLANES, TRAINS AND AUTOMOBILES

17. (C) Iritsian said that the Kars-Akhalkalaki railroad construction paused briefly during the conflict, when Turkish owners pulled back construction equipment to just inside the Turkish border. Work resumed very quickly. Iritsian acknowledged the progress on MCC road construction projects (18 kilometers of Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) road construction pass through Akhalkalaki), but underscored the importance of their completion, particularly stretches of road near Aspindza. (Comment: This section of the road and the section from Ninotsminda to the Armenian border are the responsibility of GoG. End Comment.) Throughout the visit, the Ambassador heard from local residents about the need for more jobs, including as part of the MCC road construction project. All agreed that Tbilisi has had a mental shift in how it looks at the region, according it more relevance now. During the conflict the southern route became the sole alternative national road west when Russian forces occupied Gori.

WIELDING PUBLIC OPINION

18. (C) Seda Melkumian, European Center for Minority Issues, told the Ambassador that although there is a great sense of solidarity with Georgia, many residents only get Russian television programming and thus distorted views of Georgia and its relations with Russia. Some residents have Russian passports, travel regularly to Russia to work, and are therefore dependent on Russia for their livelihood. Until the employment situation improves in the region, most residents will not question the one-sided explanation of events. Parvana television owner Kostya Vartanyan said that his regional station tries to present a more balanced picture of events, but it is difficult. Georgian Public Channel Moambe broadcasts one hour of Georgian news both in Armenian and Russian languages every day. During the height of the conflict, Alania, a quasi-government-owned Georgian station, began broadcasting Georgian news in Russian 24 hours a day, to portray another view point. Vartanyan is examining how this can be a more permanent option. Melkumian stressed that residents need several information streams so that they can come to an informed decision themselves as to the events happening on the ground.

TEFFT